

## **St. Joseph County's Family Court Project**

### **Basic Information**

**Population:** 264,779  
**County Seat:** South Bend  
**Judicial Officers:** 17  
**Project Judge:** Michael G. Gotsch, St. Joseph Circuit Court, 574-235-9551,  
[MGOTSCH@co.st-joseph.in.us](mailto:MGOTSCH@co.st-joseph.in.us).  
**Administrator:** Beth Kerns, Director, Domestic Relations Counseling Bureau, 574-235-9662, [bk\\_drcb@hotmail.com](mailto:bk_drcb@hotmail.com) or [BKERNS@co.st-joseph.in.us](mailto:BKERNS@co.st-joseph.in.us).

### **Funding**

Family Court Project funding of \$45,00 per year for two years (January 2006 – December 2007).

### **Mission Statement**

The mission of the St. Joseph County Family Court Project is to ensure that families in conflict will be appropriately served by the respective Courts having jurisdiction over their family matters via information sharing among multiple Courts.

The goals of our multi-tiered approach are to: (1) promote more coordinated and consistent decision-making for families with multiple cases in the court system through cross-reference checks with other court agencies, creation of family court cases, and case tracking reports to all courts involved in the multiple cases; (2) assess family situations and needs through screening intakes; (3) promote child safety and affordable nonadversarial "problem solving" approaches in family matters through referrals to the appropriate parental education, mediation, facilitation, high-conflict co-parenting education, high-conflict co-parenting counseling or evaluation forum, and other needed services; (4) promote child safety, accountability, and compliance with court orders by monitoring service referrals and Court orders; (5) facilitate and encourage meaningful use of court-ordered services through varied levels of direct case management services for at-risk families; (6) promote a problem-solving, nonadversarial attitude within the bar and judiciary through cooperative family law programming and local rules development.

### **Personnel and Job Descriptions**

The Director, two Bachelor-level Family Evaluators and the Executive Secretary of the Domestic Relations Counseling Bureau (DRCB) have had some of their duties reallocated to provide services (1) through (6) listed in the mission statement above.

As the Family Court Project Administrator, the DRCB director is responsible for the development and implementation of the Family Court objectives as delineated in the mission statement. She is responsible for form development, training of other Family Court personnel, and educating the local bench, bar, governmental agencies, and the community at large about the Family Court Project and its services. She also is responsible for the development of the policies

and procedures used for the Family Court Project and overseeing the success of its mission. The director is further responsible for the coordination of St. Joseph County's ADR Plan.

The Bachelor-level Family Evaluators are responsible for conducting the screening intakes, service referrals, case tracking and case management duties of the Family Court Project (described below). They are also responsible for additional records checks for possible multiple-court involvement of household members subsequent to initial record checks.

The Executive Secretary is responsible for initial record searches for possible multi-court involvement, purchasing and accounting services for the Family Court grant fund, correspondence, and other clerical/administrative duties as assigned by the Family Court Administrator.

### **Family Court Programming**

(1) Multiple Case Coordination. St. Joseph County uses the information sharing between multiple courts model, generally referred to as case tracking. The Family Court Administrator identifies eligible families from reviewing a variety of information sources, primarily from record checks and screening intakes. Referral forms or informal requests from judicial officers, attorneys, court agency personnel, CASAs, and other family services providers will be accepted. Any family with multiple cases pending in the court system is eligible for the family court.

When a family is selected for family court, all of the family's pending litigation is included in the family court proceeding, including criminal matters significant to the family. An order is issued assigning the cases to family court, but the cases remain in their original courts. The parties to the multiple cases will be given written notification of the family court status, with a copy of the family court rules applicable to the process and the right to object to the family court status. The family court case manager will prepare a written "case tracking" report that provides basic information about the pending multiple litigation for all the judges, attorneys, parties, and appropriate government agencies or service providers involved with the family. The basic information will include the names of the parties and children, addresses or custodial placement of the children, the cause number, judge/attorneys/parties involved in each case, and pending hearing dates. The case tracking report may summarize outstanding orders in each case and advise how orders can be obtained.

The DRCB will maintain a copy of the outstanding orders and docket in each case so it can be easily forwarded when requested by a judge. The report may advise the courts and the appropriate persons of the services the family is currently receiving. This information sharing on the family's multiple cases will ensure more informed decision making concerning safety and stability issues for the children, and help coordinate needed services for families. The information sharing between the courts and parties will avoid conflicting hearing dates and inconsistent court orders for family members.

(2) Screening Intakes. This form and procedure were developed to quickly assess for the appropriateness of mediation and/or the identification of special needs, high-risk social issues, and/or possible multiple court involvement. Referrals are taken formally and informally from judicial officers or attorneys. The screening form takes about 45-60 minutes to complete in a private interview with each parent and a Bachelor's-level staff member. A letter summarizing the family's issues is sent to the referring court advising what initial services or interventions would be appropriate. This procedure was implemented in the latter part of 2005 in anticipation of receiving a Family Court Project grant. As of 10/31/06, 556 families have been screened exclusively for the previously mentioned issues.

(3) Service Referrals. A Bachelor's level staff member will assist families in finding appropriate assistance for their needs in the community. The needs assessment is accomplished through the screening intake or may be delineated by a referral source. Referral forms or informal requests from judicial officers, attorneys, court agency personnel, CASAs, other family services providers, and a family member will be accepted.

(4) ADR: Mediation and High Conflict Resolution Group Counseling. Subsidized domestic relations mediation services are being developed with registered mediators in the county. Family Court Project grant monies will be used while the St. Joseph County ADR Plan fund accrues money. Six attorney-mediators have agreed to provide reduced rate mediation services for low-income families per the guidelines delineated in the ADR Plan (\$100 per hour, cap of \$500). Referral forms or informal requests from judicial officers, attorneys, court agency personnel, CASAs, other family services providers, and self referrals will be accepted.

St. Joseph's ADR Plan was submitted to the Division of State Court Administration in February 2006. Requested revisions were made and a signed version was resubmitted in March 2006. The Courts will begin collecting the \$20 ADR filing fee in July 2006.

A therapeutic conflict resolution group counseling program was developed by a local mental health agency. Called "Partners in Parenting," the program consists of twelve two-hour weekly sessions designed to empower parents through acknowledging the reality of their difficult situation and providing information and skills for developing healthy co-parenting. Both parents must attend all sessions. Self-referrals, attorney referrals and court-mandated referrals are accepted. Family Court project grant monies will be used to subsidized attendance at this program for low-income families (cap of \$500) until ADR Plan funds are available.

(5) Case Management. A variety of case management services are being provided by the Bachelor-level staff members who are conducting the screenings. At one end of the continuum are "low impact" case management services, such as coordinating needed services for families and monitoring compliance with referrals or court orders. At the other end are case management services that are "high impact," involving more direct contact with families and service providers and providing more frequent and intensive advisory reports to the Courts. These services were also implemented in the latter part of 2005 in anticipation of receiving the Family Court Project grant. Eleven families thus far have been involved with these services.